DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 353 CE 055 714

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TITLE Student Services: Achilles Heel or Crown Jewel? NHSC Occasional Paper Number 1.
INSTITUTION National Home Study Council, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Dec 89
NOTE 21p.; Portions of this paper appear in "Home Study Student Services Handbook" (1981).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Problems; Adult Students; Correspondence Schools; Correspondence Study; *Home Study; *Participant Satisfaction; Part Time Students; Postsecondary Education; *Program Administration; Program Implementation; *Program Improvement; *Student Personnel Services

ABSTRACT

A serious problem in home study in recent years has been that, too often, some schools have been paying little attention to student services. They have concentrated their budgets on advertising to recruit new students, while doing little to encourage present students or new recruits to stay in the program. Efforts have been made to reduce the level and amount of services and to cut expenses in misguided attempts to ensure institutional survival and profitability. High technology has often eroded rather than enhanced services, as machine-graded, objective tests replaced teacher-made tests and instructor's comments. As a result, course cancellations and dropout rates are climbing, students express dissatisfaction with their experiences, and the method of home study education has thereby been diminished. Correspondence students are mostly mature, self-motivated adults. They are generally paying their own tuition out of their own pockets, and they expect quality and are willing to pay for it. If a school is spending less than one-third of tuition dollars received on serving the enrolled students, then it can likely expect less than satisfied students and eventual erosion of its position in the marketplace. Professional service is an important key to financial and educational success in home study today. This booklet includes lists of the goals of student services, what constitutes excellence in student services, and a checklist for types of services. (KC)

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NHSC OCCASIONAL PAPER NUMBER 1

by
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Published by the National Home Study Council,
Washington, D.C.

December 1989

NHSC OCCASIONAL PAPERS are essays intended to stimulate and encourage candid exchanges of ideas between home study professionals.

Author's Note: Portions of this paper appear in NHSC's *Home Study Student Services Handbook* published in 1981.

Introduction

With the increasing sophistication of home study school operations in recent years, with the growing need for economies of scale at larger schools, and with the increasing demands for efficiency and cost effectiveness which upwardly spiraling costs and prudent business practice require, it should come as no surprise that pressures have been building within many NHSC schools to "keep the lid on" expenses.

One prominent target of cost containment, and certainly an area where high technology has been heavily employed in home study, is the venerable student services department.

Today, student services are being subjected to cost cutting efficiencies which are unprecedented in the history of correspondence education. For example, a single computer-graded sheet listing a machine printed numeric test score is all a student gets back from some schools.

As an ancillary to this recent development, the traditional prestige and the relatively esteemed position of the Director of Education has been seriously eroded. In fact, several schools no longer have such a staff position.

While tuitions have increased, the amount and quality of student services have failed to match the tuition hikes in some institutions. The truly personal touch has been fading from the home study picture for some time now.

One of the old age challenges faced by home study educators has been high course attrition. Yet, rather than enhancing post-enrollment services, many schools have slashed both expenses and services through:

- shipping first study materials book rate
- using machine grading, with no personalized "feedback" or references or comments
- deleting use of motivational letters
- deleting use of toll free telephone services

- overusing objective, rote recall exam items
- ignoring functional assignments in favor of "easy and cheap to grade quizzes"
- failing to respond promptly and adequately to questions from students
- diminishing the tutorial role historically played by faculty

The challenge, simply stated, is this: accredited schools must begin immediately to implement more and better student services if the traditional model of the correspondence education method is to survive this century.

In other words, keeping "old customers" no longer seems to be in vogue at some institutions.

It is ironic that vast efforts are often launched to capture new students through vigorous advertising campaigns; yet, similar efforts -- if they were to be put into enhancing student services -- would probably net better "bottom line results."

This essay will explore the importance of student services to the continued vitality of home study. It will suggest a variety of ideas for schools to consider. Hopefully, calling attention to this serious and growing problem now will result in a renewed interest by school management in enhancing services to students.

The Curse of Technology?

As we have all seen, high technology has been warmly embraced by most home study educators in the past decade.

There is certainly no question that in larger schools, the computer has been a welcomed blessing in controlling the avalanche of paper which is the bane of any school teaching by mail.

There are many instances where the employment of high technology has indeed helped enhance student service:

- exams are quickly and accurately scored

- mail is processed efficiently
- students can have questions answered in "real time" over the telephone
- academic record-keeping has been streamlined
- students can send exams by fax machine or telephone
- desktop publishing has allowed schools to compress the length of time it takes to produce a professional looking course.

On the other hand, we have witnessed a notable lack of personalized student service and a misuse of high technology:

- student exams get only a numeric score on them
- motivation letters have a "machine produced" look
- the human touch has been erased from the boards; the only form of school communication some students have is with a computer
- some desktop published courses are poorly designed, cluttered, and are difficult to follow.

The essential point to be remembered is that it is possible to achieve warm, human service through the use of high technology. The computer can be intelligently employed to free up school staff to provide even greater personalized attention to students.

The temptation, however, is to replace people (who cost money) with computers (which pay for themselves), and to let the computer supplant the human touch. Student services has become, in one sense, home study's Achilles Heel.

Management needs to be alert to the opportunities for enhancing services afforded by high technology. The "bottom line" question is always: "Does the use of technology materially contribute to the achievement of this institution's overall mission?"

Technology should never be a thoughtless substitute for effective home study service. It should be a tool to aid in improving and providing *more* service, not in diminishing it.

What Do We Mean by Student Service?

The single most important cluster of tasks performed by a correspondence institution falls under the general category of student services. For a century, home study instruction has prided itself on the "one to one" personalized instruction it provides independent learners.

Student service is the heart of the correspondence learning method. It is the reason for being for all quality home study school.

Student service is also called instruction service, administrative service, or academic service. The important factors are: (1) the teaching institution; (2) a student; and (3) all of the interactions each has with the other throughout the student's period of studies.

In essence, student service includes all of the documents, communications, materials, directives, requests, responses, information, and data which flow from the teaching institution to the student.

While most schools divide student services into "instructional" service (responding to subject matter queries, evaluating work) and "administrative" service (e.g., sending new texts), the goals remain the same: prompt, efficient and warm help to students.

The transmission of the materials and services may be oral (via telephone) or written. The services may be performed as a routine, self-generated action on the school's part (e.g., motivational letters) or the services may be triggered by a student's request.

The form the particular service takes is less important than the function of the service itself. The overall objectives of student services are to facilitate the learning process, to assist students in reaching their learning goals, and to insure that students study diligently and become satisfied graduates.

Why is Student Service Important?

Student service is important because without it, a correspondence institution would probably be a textbook publishing house, not an educational institution.

Student service is important because students are not buying texts to read on their own; they are enrolling in a school which has promised to teach them, to facilitate learning, and to help them to reach predetermined educational outcomes. Students have a perfect right to expect warm, friendly, responsive, and systematic assistance with their studies form their school.

Student service is important because "a studying student is a paying student." In the long run it is less costly to hold on to the student you have already enrolled, rather than to try to enroll a new student. This axiom is in danger of being forgotten today.

The mystique of independent study via correspondence is inextricably bound up in a match between learner and subject, learner and text materials, and learner and the "school." Servicing the student throughout his or her enrollment period is the glue which bonds these interdependent parts. An organization purporting to call itself a home study or correspondence school which does not conduct an ongoing, vigorous, responsive service program with students is not a correspondence institution at all. Service is what home study students are really buying when they enroll. Because they have chosen to study independently, without the mutual reinforcement of classmates, without the immediate feedback available from a teacher in a classroom, without the rigid schedule enforced by class attendance, without (sometimes) the resources of a laboratory or library across the campus, home study students deserve a teaching institution which is dedicated to fast, efficient, and high quality service.

Finally, student service is important because it can provide a healthy financial return to the school. Good, efficient student services will yield rewards to the school in --

- Lower non-start rates
- Higher lesson completion rates

- Higher graduation rates
- Higher tuition collection rates
- Lower tuition refund rates
- Increased referrals of new students
- Higher placement rates
- Higher re-enrollment rates.

The Goals of Student Service

The nature of student service can be said to include actions by a school which:

- provide guidance on how to proceed through the course
- facilitate and enhance learning
- insure course completion
- provide fast and efficient responses to student requests
- solve problems
- respond promptly and fairly to student complaints or problems
- treat each student equitably
- supplement independent learning with reinforcement and feedback from the school.

Every department and every person in a correspondence institution have a role to play in executing specific tasks which will help achieve these goals. Course writers, instructors, administrative clerks, warehouse staff, counselors, and field representatives all have critical roles to play in insuring that each of these goals are met for each student.

The school's entire staff should be considered a team that is devoted to servicing students in every feasible way. Thus, the primary objective of every school could really be summed up in three words: "Service to Students."

Check List for Services

In considering what types of student services are to be provided, correspondence educators should ask these questions:

Is the service --

Yes	No	
		functional to both the kind of students enrolled and the nature of subject matter?
		appropriate for the level of subject?
		cost effective? Is there a good balance between the expenditure of funds for service versus marketing costs? Versus the results gained by providing the service?
		efficient?
		available and fair to all students? (Do all students have an equal opportunity to take advantage of the service?)
		compatible with the school's ability to provide it in a consistent and effective way?
		appropriate to the home study method?
		able to contribute to the overall goals of learning enhancement and course completion?
		able to make good use of the strengths of correspondence instruction (personalization) while compensating for its constraints (space and time)?
		able to capitalize on the subject matter -- does it give services which are course related (e.g., stock market investment simulation in an investment course)?

What Kind of Services?

Early in the development of any new home study course the course author should meet with top management and the educational director to determine what types of student services need to be in place by the time the course is ready to be marketed to the public.

The course author can be a rich resource of ideas for creative student service. By careful planning, student services can be incorporated directly into the course materials.

The resulting product is then an integrated, coherent learning experience, not a stack of books. The service a school renders should be a logical extension of the texts.

As an aside, one of the reasons cited by experts for the growing superiority of European and Japanese students over their American counterparts, we are told, is that American educators have become slaves to using multiple choice objective test questions, rather than essay questions. The European and Japanese students are subjected to heavy measures of essay writing. It's a point to consider as we develop our courses.

In approaching course development, the school must be sensitive to potential student service opportunities -- the school should strive for *every* reasonable opportunity to provide personalized, useful service to students. The opportunities include such areas as:

- convenient, attractive course packaging
- easy to understand study instructions
- easy to locate course components
- handy "request for help forms"
- where to get information or help from the school
- how to troubleshoot problems
- telephone cards with toll-free telephone number
- job aids and course components which can be used at work.

Other popular student service ideas are:

- toll-free telephone service response to queries
- progress reports mailed to employers
- model solutions
- newsletters
- motivational letters to encourage students
- how to study booklets and audio tapes
- pre-paid, stamped envelopes
- job placement assistance
- transcript services
- personalized critiques on audio tapes
- video tapes illustrating applications of skills
- submitting exams via fax machines or over the telephone.

The list of student service ideas and opportunities could go on for pages. The key point is that service should be built into the course itself. Service should be second nature to the school's staff.

What is Excellence in Student Service?

In looking at the variety of services offered by home study institutions, we find in student service departments in most schools a commitment to excellence, a sincere desire to help students.

Just what is excellence in student service? No hard and fast uniform standards can be applied. The differences found in various institutions are too great for us to advocate a single set of standards.

Still, quality in student service is readily apparent. Here are just a few characteristics of good student service:

1. Course materials are attractively packaged and are easy for students to use.

2. Materials are shipped promptly -- students can begin their first lesson within a few days of enrollment.

3. Students always have an adequate supply of materials to study.

4. Defective course texts or kits are replaced promptly and without question.

5. For most courses, assignments and exams are processed and graded promptly -- they are in the student's hands within a 5-6 day time frame (starting with the day the assignment is received by the school). Assignments have motivating comments, pertinent notations and other evidence of personal attention.

6. Non-technical inquiries are handled immediately -- simple requests are filled within one day.

7. Subject matter inquiries merit individualized, warm responses, and satisfactory answers are in the student's hands within a week after receipt of inquiry.

8. Student's ability to access the school is easy, simple, and even fun! Students who ask questions or have problems should feel they have received personal, quick attention from a caring person at the school.

9. Students should feel their school cares about them -- warm letters of motivation, frequent school-generated contacts (e.g., newsletters) make students feel they "belong." Telephone personnel are highly trained and can give warm smiles over the telephone.

10. Everything the school provides the student, from texts to motivation letters through collection communications to end of course diplomas, reflect high quality, competence, taste, and an obvious commitment to service, service, service.

There are dozens of other characteristics of professional student service in a school. These are but a few. The ultimate test is the students' satisfaction. If students aren't satisfied, they -- and the marketplace -- will let you know.

Conclusion

One serious problem in home study in recent years has been that, too often, some schools have been paying scant attention to student services. Instead, there have been concentrated efforts to reduce the level and amount of service, to cut expenses in misguided attempts to insure institutional survival and profitability.

High technology has often been misapplied. Instead of enhancing service, it has eroded it in several cases. As a result, course non-start and drop out rates are climbing, students express dissatisfaction with their experiences and the method of home study education has thereby been diminished.

Correspondence students are mostly adult, mature, self-motivated people. They generally are paying their own tuition out of their own pockets. They expect quality -- and are willing to pay for it. If a school is spending less than one third of tuition dollars received on servicing an enrollment, then it can likely expect less than satisfied students . . . and eventual erosion of its position in the marketplace. Professional service is an important key to financial and educational success in home study today.

Let's put student service back in its deserved place as home study's "Jewel in the Crown."

Appendix A

60 Ways to Provide Service to the Correspondence Student

Have a Plan -- Take Every Opportunity to Provide Service

On an Inquiry -

personalized response related to prospect's interest
offer to discuss or consult if prospect has questions
adequate follow-up
detailed information on course content and school service
express mail an acknowledgment of the enrollment

On Enrollment -

individual analysis of student's qualifications and interests
telephone verification and welcome to the school
letter of welcome from the President
attractive starter packet
"soon-after" enrollment survey on personal data
express mail first lesson package

While Studying -

school bulletin or newsletter
appropriate, personalized comments on assignments
periodic academic assessment
along-the-way certificates for progress made
student surveys
making the most of course revision - technical bulletins

subject field update

enrichment tapes, video or audio

regional seminars, help sessions

special recognition for achievement, scholarship

When Academically Delinquent -

regular follow-up

special telephone call for lesson submission

opportunity to extend time, take remedial programs

express mail reminders

When Financially Delinquent -

timely reminders

special incentives for catch-up, paying ahead

coordinated effort if academically delinquent

express mail reminders

refinancing offers

When the School has a Problem, Explanation about -

inventory shortages

slow mail

backed-up lesson processing

computer mix-up

state of complaints

change of address or school procedures

When there is a Complaint -

special handling - telephone response

no quibbling over inconsequential details

fair, firm, consistent position

prompt and cheerful settlements. Take the credit!

At Graduation –

attractive diploma

special recognition for high academic achievement

letter or call of congratulations

school-prepared announcement for student to give local paper, employer

rings, pins, ties, etc.

end of course survey

placement consultations

resume preparation assistance

request for referrals

After Graduation –

placement assistance

updating resumes

periodic newsletters

alumni associations

alumni trips and meetings

advance courses and discounts for re-enrollment

brush-up short programs

consultation on course-related questions

alumni surveys

alumni referrals

scholarship opportunities

Appendix B

Some Possible Problems and Causes

Problem	Possible Causes
High Non-Starts	
	over-aggressive sales presentation
	ad copy fails to match course objectives
	starter package sent late
	unattractive, poorly printed material
	starter packages too intimidating
	poor how-to-study directions
	vague course objectives
	course objectives not covered in text
	first lesson too difficult
	enrollment processing delayed

(continued)

Problem	Causes
Low Completion Rate	
	☐ exams too easy or too rote recall
	☐ exams do not measure objectives
	☐ lessons too complicated to follow
	☐ student service personnel uncaring or rude
	☐ study materials shipped late
	☐ student can't reach "right person" at school
	☐ school fails to offer incentives
	☐ assignments graded too impersonally
	☐ feedback from "live" instructor lacking
	☐ assignments not returned promptly
	☐ student's goals change mid-course
	☐ course is too long, too involved, too difficult
	☐ students have little to show for their work except a machine graded card with a numeric score on it
	☐ letters to students dry and impersonal

About the Author

Michael P. Lambert is a native of Pennsylvania. He holds graduate degrees in Business Administration and in English. He joined the NHSC in 1972 as Accrediting Program Coordinator, was named Assistant Director in 1977 and Associate Director in 1987.

He attended the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, George Mason University, Virginia, and Cambridge University, England. He served in the army as an education and training officer, and served as an operations officer during his Army Reserve duty. He taught at the secondary and college levels. Mr. Lambert served on more than 400 accreditation examination committees. He authored or edited numerous books and articles on correspondence education and accreditation, including correspondence courses on effective writing, new course planning, and business standards.

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